3 Virtual exchange: Romania and Hungary 100 years later

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Abstract

The aim of this Virtual Exchange (VE) project was to bring together students from the Andrássy Gyula German speaking university (AUB) in Budapest, Hungary, and Lucian Blaga University in Sibiu (LBUS), Romania, in order for them to get to know their neighbors and reflect on the way the end of WWI is remembered 100 years later. In this case study, we discuss the way we conceived the three iterations of the VE (2018-2020), the challenges we faced on different levels, as well as the value of this teaching method for the academic field of history.

Keywords: cultural memory, culture of remembrance, central European history, Romanian history, Hungarian history, cultural studies.

1.   Context

The last three years, including 2020, have been years both of celebration and of mourning in Central Europe. While some nation states commemorated their coming into existence in the aftermath of the First World War, others lamented the consequent loss of territory and population. The governments organized celebrations on a national scale, people gathered in public demonstrations, politicians spoke about the events, while historians wrote about them; works of

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art were created and private companies used the symbolic value of these events to sell products. The series of three VE between AUB and LBUS was aimed at students in the neighboring countries Romania and Hungary with the purpose of addressing three historical events and their remembrance from an analytical and scientifically critical point of view.

In this context, we analyzed, together with the student-participants, the events that happened 100 years ago (Boia, 2017) from the point of view of cultural remembrance (Assmann, 2008). The purpose of the three iterations of the VE was to combine historical facts, the concept of cultural remembrance and discourse analysis as a research method to question the way history is constructed in Central Europe.

The idea for the exchange arose when Robert O'Dowd spoke about the possibilities offered by VE in a course Andra Cioltan-Drăghiciu attended at the University of Graz in spring 2018. Finding the concept fascinating and very fitting for a history class, she proceeded in looking for a partner, which she found in Daniela Stanciu, a historian she had known since high-school. Thus, a 'robust partnership' (O'Dowd, 2013) was created by means of personal networks, which enabled the two teacher-partners to repeat the exchange successfully.

Under the guidance of the UniCollaboration team, the first exchange of the series began in autumn that same year. The concept of the course and the idea of the VE was very appealing to both historians, as it represented a good opportunity for lecturers and students to cooperate in a virtual classroom, and reflect on topics of great importance to their field.

As neither of the universities had ever been involved in such a project before, we had the opportunity to offer our students something new and exciting, while also raising their awareness about stereotypes and the ways the two nations had created 'mutually incompatible fairy tales' (Hobsbawm, 1996) to legitimize their existence. The biggest challenge in the beginning of the course was for the students to acknowledge that the cultural and historical stereotypes they had

grown up with merely represent social constructs and that communication is the best way to overcome them.

Participating in the course from the AUB were Master students enrolled in the cultural diplomacy and/or Central European history programs. The exchange was integrated in the curriculum as part of the class 'Transculturality and Cultural Conflict', for which the students received credits.

Students from LBUS were Bachelor students from the Department of History, Heritage Studies, and Protestant Theology. Unfortunately, the LBUS' fixed curriculum did not permit the integration of the course, so the students and the lecturer did not receive any credit or remuneration for participating – they did it voluntarily in their own time. As remarked by O'Dowd (2013), university management has yet to recognize the value of these activities and incorporate them into the syllabi.

A very interesting, but also difficult part was the fact that the participants from the AUB were of different nationalities, from Hungarians and Germans to a student from Tajikistan. This meant that they had different levels of knowledge about Central European history and culture, but also, as it turned out during the exchange, a very different set of language and analytical skills. The students from the LBUS, on the other hand, came from a homogenous milieu, with limited multicultural experience or contact with students from other universities. Since most of them were young undergraduate students, the VE allowed them to appreciate the contact to other cultural milieus and broaden their horizon. In this respect, the exchange was of great help for the Romanian students in developing not only their language skills, but also their understanding of multicultural societies and universities. Moreover, as undergraduate students, the participants from LBUS had to catch up with the historical information; this is the reason why we insisted on including a theoretical part in the very first VE.

One challenge was the significant differences in knowledge and English language skills among the students.

In the first iteration of the exchange, a total of nine students attended the courses and worked together in mixed teams on some specific themes, such as *analysis of the political discourse* regarding the events happening 100 years ago (1918), advertisements inspired by these events, and remembering 1918 in art and artistic festivals, happening in Sibiu and Budapest in 2018. This was also a 'blended exchange' in that we managed to organize a mobility so the groups of students could visit each other's universities and present the results of their projects in the frame of two workshops we organized in Sibiu (17th of December 2018) and Budapest (23th of March 2019).

The second iteration of the VE took place in the first semester of the academic year 2019/2020 and brought together eight students from the two aforementioned universities. In the last iteration of our three-semester series, nine students from the two universities came together, to discuss the ways in which the Treaty of Trianon is currently remembered.

2.   Aims and description of the project

The main goal of the exchange was to bring students from these neighboring countries together and thus create a dialogue on some of the most controversial events of their history, to discuss the ways in which history is constructed and exploited for political or financial purposes, how narratives are created in order to serve a particular agenda, and that historical facts are not objective realities, irrefutable truths, but subjective constructions, which can be bent to accommodate specific needs. As well as acquiring communication and online skills, the main aim was for students to understand that history is shaped by different perspectives, not only by the academic point of view.

3.   Pedagogical design and tools

The exchanges combined a theoretical and a practical, collaborative component. In each iteration, students were first equipped with the necessary background

historical knowledge and analytical frameworks. Subsequently they worked in transnational groups, exploring and analyzing specific historic events and how these events are remembered and reconstructed in different contexts.

The first iteration of the exchange took place in 2018, the year which symbolically marked 100 years since the Unification of the Romanian Provinces. The students were divided into three groups (one student from the AUB and two from the LBUS in each group). For this first exchange, which lasted throughout the winter semester, we applied the blended learning method (O'Dowd, 2013), which meant that the online classes were integrated in the usual classroom activities. Each lecturer discussed the theoretical part with her own students in the physical classroom and all the participants together with the teachers subsequently met four times in a Zoom virtual classroom for a total of 90 minutes per session in order for the students to get to know each other and pick the topics for their common presentations. The three major themes addressed were culture of remembrance (Assmann, 2008) on Trianon and Greater Romania in advertisement, arts, and politics.

Allowing them the freedom to choose their topic unfortunately led to very unbalanced groups in terms of language and analytical skills. Even though each group contained one master and two undergraduate students, the participants with better English and analytical skills were interested in the same topic and thus ended up in the same group.

To prepare their presentations, the participants communicated with their group via Google Drive, Messenger, and WhatsApp. Whenever they needed help or had any questions about the task, they turned to the lecturers for guidance, but other than that, they were encouraged to work independently, without direct supervision. At the end of the semester, each group presented the result of their project in Zoom meetings.

To avoid the aforementioned imbalance, for the second iteration of the exchange in 2019 on the topic of the occupation of Budapest by the Romanian Army (1919), we decided to do the theoretical work together asynchronously.

This was done via a Facebook group, which we preferred to Moodle because we did not want to overwhelm the students with new technologies. Each lecturer posted a task such as reading specialized texts and then answering the teacher's questions regarding those texts. The students responded by commenting on each post, then received feedback from the lecturer who created the task. Having their work assessed by someone other than their own teacher stimulated the students and confronted them with a new teaching approach and a different set of expectations.

Reading their written answers allowed us to better assess their English and analytical skills, but also their knowledge on the subject. It was important for us to examine each participant's skills both in terms of language and of methodological knowledge in order to pair them up in balanced groups and to make sure they could keep up with the tasks.

This time there were four groups of two, one student from the AUB and one from the LBUS. What we observed, however, was that this approach was not ideal either, as pairing up a student with a solid knowledge base and good English skills with a student without these characteristics prevented the former from reaching their full potential. This is certainly something we had to work out for the third VE on the Treaty of Trianon (1920), which started in March 2020 with nine students, three of which had participated in the second iteration of the exchange. We solved the problem by carefully assessing their English and analytical skills, then pairing them up in one group of three and three groups of two by adjusting the subjects and difficulty of the respective projects to their skills.

While diligent collaboration among the students seemed like a given during the first iteration of the exchange, there was a group in the second iteration which faced some communication issues with one of the students trying to contact the other repeatedly and not receiving any answer until the lecturers stepped in. This made us realize how important the interest of each individual is in sustaining a VE, especially when they are not motivated extrinsically by the perspective of grades or credits. To avoid this issue in our last exchange, we created group chats

with each group and the lecturers, so whenever communication issues arose, the participants could write in those groups, making sure both their teammates and the lecturers saw their attempt at communicating.

For this third and last exchange of our series, we invited a guest lecturer, Dr Florian Kührer-Wielach, a specialist from the Institute for South-Eastern Culture and History in Munich, to observe the course by taking part in the Zoom sessions and creating tasks for the participants. He took over the practical part of our introduction and gave the students materials on discourse analysis, then had them answer some questions and analyse texts using this method. The concept of VE was new to him, as it is among our research community. By offering him, the director of a prestigious historical institute, a glimpse into our class, we hope to introduce VE among historians and promote it as an innovative means of teaching history especially in neighboring countries with competing historiographies, as is often the case in Central Europe.

4.   Evaluation and assessment

In the first VE, the joint presentations were assessed after their completion by taking into consideration criteria such as form, content, and critical analysis. During the semester, the students worked on the following topics: cultural remembrance in advertisement, commemorative performances in Budapest and Sibiu, and political discourse of Hungarian and Romanian politicians. The students sent their PowerPoint presentations to the coordinators, who made suggestions, comments, and spelling checks. Thus, they were able to update their slides before presenting them to the other participants in the Zoom virtual classroom. After each final presentation, the groups received written feedback from the coordinators, which consisted in remarks regarding the methodology used, the flaws in their analysis, and suggestions regarding historical sources.

After the first VE, we asked for funding from Erasmus+ teacher mobility and our respective departments and were able to organize two workshops, one in Sibiu, in December 2018, and the second one in Budapest, in March 2019.

This way, the students had the opportunity to meet in person and discuss the project but also to form a deeper, personal relationship. Each group presented their project again in front of students and professors from the LBUS and AUB, who were very excited and curious about the VE. The coordinators presented short introductions and conclusions, whereas the highlight of the workshops consisted in the Zoom presentations made by UniCollaboration experts. The aim of these presentations was to introduce VE to students and professors at both universities, as they had never been confronted with this type of teaching before. Having VE experts contribute to the workshops gave the events authority in the face of our program directors, who could thus convince themselves that our virtual classes were part of a larger endeavor on a European scale, supported by European institutions.

At the end of the second iteration in the 2019 semester, each of the four groups presented the results of their research. The first group focused on the topic of international press and cultural memory of 1919 in Hungary and Romania, the second one analyzed Hungarian and Romanian history textbooks, whereas Groups 3 and 4 researched historical journals. In the end, the comparative approaches and analyses presented by the students were thoroughly documented, most of them with strong, well-structured arguments. After presenting their projects, the students received written feedback from the coordinators, which contained some suggestions and recommendations for the future.

As mentioned above, the students from the AUB received grades and credits for taking part in the VE, as opposed to the students from LBUS. The ideal circumstances for VEs described by O'Dowd (2013), training and support of teachers, and integration of VE in the department's curriculum, were not given, but the institutions contributed financially by enabling the physical mobility of the participants, a method they were more comfortable with. Thus, the workshops financed by the two universities were meant as a reward for the participation in the first VE. All the participants in the exchanges received Erasmus+ badges, which they were happy to include in their resumes. Aside from the content, historical, and methodological skills they acquired during the course, the students benefited from learning to work online via tools like Zoom and Google Drive.

Student feedback:

> "Erasmus+ VE was an amazing experience, one that truly impacted the manner in which I see European history in general and interethnic relations in particular. Being part of this project gave me the huge opportunity of seeing things objectively, of knowing students from other countries and of using tech means I did not use before. Moreover, I got to understand different points of view and manners in which one approaches history today through the eyes of past events that scarred the collective memory. With all my heart, I would recommend VE to all the students that want to expand their knowledge and to know amazing people".

> "As far as I am concerned, the exchange was an enjoyable and fulfilling experience. Through this project, I was able to meet new people with whom I could exchange ideas and opinions. This project also introduced me to an interesting video conference app called 'Zoom' which proved to be very reliable during the realization of our project. The subject chosen for this project allowed me, as a Romanian history student, to see another side of the discourse regarding these events and made me realize that such controversial events cannot be analyzed just from one perspective. This project also allowed me to assess and improve my communication skills in the English language. VE also helped me to refine my teamwork skills, but also my time and task management capabilities. This project also made me realize that in this day and age, thanks in part to advancements in telecommunications technology, anything can be done with a stable internet connection and a lot of communication".

This experience is proving of great value now, in times of world-wide quarantine, when all classes are held online. The students who have participated in our exchange have shown greater flexibility in solving tasks online, they are familiar with tools such as Google Drive and Zoom, which others (professors and students alike) were just beginning to master. The same is true for us as

lecturers. We did not have any difficulties making the transition from physical to virtual classes, we did not need to invest time in learning how to use the proper tools and our colleagues turned to us for advice in managing classes online.

5. Conclusion

Our conclusion as lecturers in the field of history is that VE is a viable, refreshing, and fruitful alternative teaching method which enriched both the didactical experience of the coordinators and the communicative, technical, and linguistic skills of the students. Addressing sensitive historical topics through the eyes of students with different cultural and intellectual backgrounds allows for a holistic approach of the subject and for the broadening of the individual perspective, a fact which undoubtedly enriches the academic experience for both lecturer and student. Moreover, we were privileged enough to be able to implement the three iterations in the three most important consecutive years for Central European history, thus going full circle in analyzing cultural remembrance in Romania and Hungary one hundred years after these symbolically charged events occurred.

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